

# Oral History Kosovo

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## INTERVIEW WITH HARRY BAJRAKTARI

New York | May 18, 2016

Duration: 29 minutes

Present:

1. Harry Bajraktari (Speaker)
2. Anna Di Lellio (Interviewer)
3. Rexhep Myftari (Camera)

*Transcription notation symbols of non-verbal communication:*

*() – emotional communication*

*{ } – the speaker explains something using gestures.*

*Other transcription conventions:*

*[ ] – addition to the text to facilitate comprehension*

*Footnotes are editorial additions to provide information on localities, names or expressions.*

*[The interview was conducted in Albanian, the italic parts of it were originally said in English]*

**Harry Bajraktari:** *So...they had arrested, you know, they have come to the...my hometown, and they surrounded, the communists and the Serbs, you know, they come, to, to, to town, want to capture my father's uncle, his name was Shpend Bajraktari, and what happened, they couldn't capture him that time, that moment, that morning, so they arrested my dad and his uncle, you know, and other people, and they took them to Peja, this was in November, so what happened is the uncle and two other cousins, they executed them, and my dad was seventeen years old and they let him go, because, "You are seventeen, we are going to have you go to join the military in Drenica, to fight against the Albanians." You know. So, for nine months or eight...nine months, he was, you know, chasing the Albanians, now the partisans, you know, whatever, the Serbs. And we go back and forth, then they name this place 17 Nëndori [November] and the whole nine yards, and I come back sixty years later, I buy the place, I took down 17 Nëndori [November] and I put my dad's name, it's called Metë Bajraktari Plaza, how the world you know {crosses his hands} like, it, it goes back, you know, it's unpredictable, what you can do, so it's a, it's an interesting thing, you know, but you know, we've been very fortunate beings...coming to this great country where we have the ability to do those things, otherwise, you know, we couldn't do it. That's one human story, so...*

**Anna Di Lellio:** *Why were they looking for Shpend Bajraktari?*

**Harry Bajraktari:** He was...our family had, oh, our family was always, they fought against Turks, they fought against Serbs, against Montenegrins, against occ...against people who occupied Kosovo, and he was a major at that time...during, during the Italian and German occupation, he was a major, and right after the communists came, then the Serbs, they wanted to arrest him, to execute him and they came and arrested him, they came and besieged the village, that day he had people with him, and they said, "Give us the weapons." He said, "No, I will not give you the weapons," he said, "I will only give you the weapons once I go to Baran, to the municipality, I will give you the weapons once I get to the municipality."

So, he had around 20 people with weapons, the army escorting them from the front and from behind on the way to Baran, when they went to a place there, they turned the weapons to them and they left,

they went behind, the village was besieged, they arrested Zenel Bajraktari, Hajdin Zeka and Fazli Rama and my father, 17 years old, they sent them to Peja. After two weeks they told my father, "You are seventeen years old, we don't want to execute you, but you have to go to the war in Drenica and fight against the Albanians." He was forced, they told him, "Go to your family for two days, and from there go to the war in Drenica to fight against the Albanians." And he fought against the Albanians for nine months, he was with the brigades, there were Albanians, Montenegrins, also Serbs...and during that time, after two weeks, Zenel, Hajdin Zeka and Fadil Rama were executed. Still to this day, we don't know where they are buried, they were executed at that time and that was it.

And then we came to, to America, years passed, here and there. Peja built the most beautiful center they had in the middle of the city, they named it *17 Nëndori* [17 November], it was the liberation day when communists and Serbs took Peja, and they named the most beautiful shop in the '60s, in the very late '60s, and in 2006 we bought it with the privatization in Kosovo and changed its name from *17 Nëndori* [17 November]. We removed it and changed it into Metë Bajraktari Plaza, that's weird, 60-70 years pass, 70 years pass, and when you return there again, you come to America, you return there from America and remove *17 Nëndori* [17 November] and put the name of the father, my father, people who had sacrificed for that place.

**Anna Di Lellio:** *Just tell me the story of the Pajtimi [Blood Feud Reconciliation Movement]. What happened here? How did they come here? If you...as many details as you have, also if you have, if you know some people who were in blood feuds and why was your father involved, I mean, just really, more than just saying, "They came here and these were the people who came." Just give us a sense of what it was.*

**Harry Bajraktari:** Since, as we know, Kosovo was going through difficult times in the '90s, in '89, and it was a kind of war for Kosovo to be liberated, to be liberated through that war, one of the, I think the most important thing is the Blood Feuds Reconciliation, where people had misunderstandings, they had murders, they had those, and they united the people, and it was, I think that it was a kind of referendum for Kosovo to be liberated, liberated and independent, where people were united, they forgave the blood for the sake of Kosovo, for the sake of the country, and this started with only a few people, then it was, I think, a very great movement, but I see it as if it was a referendum for our nation to be liberated, for the day to come when we are an independent day.

Anton Çetta, with many of his friends, with professor Mark Krasniqi, Don Lush Gjergji, Zekerija Cana and many many others, did a great job, a great job, a contribution to the Albanian people, because they united the people in difficult times, they forgave the bloods and started the work to liberate, to defend the homeland, to defend our country, to...This happened in Kosovo, what happened at that time was phenomenal, and it is, I think it was a holy movement for our nation, it liberated people, people felt good, people felt happy because they were forgiving the blood, the wound, the conflict, they were forgiving everything for the sake of the country, for the sake of Kosovo, for the sake of the people, they thought that the forgiving of these bloods, and their people who had died and who had

been killed didn't go to waste, that their forgiving is for the existence for Kosovo, to be liberated and to this day to be an independent country, that was all the connection.

Led by Anton Çetta, and all of his friends, they forgave many bloods around Kosovo, then they started going to Germany and Switzerland, and the time came for them to come to America. Besim Malota, with some of his friends, was in an association here, I don't remember the name of the association, they invited them to come to America. When they came here to America they stayed in New York for a few weeks, they went to Detroit and talked to people, where twelve bloods were reconciled, conflicts, wounds, and this is how they healed the nation.

It was a, a great pride for our nation, for our people, for our nation to go and wait for *Krushqit e Pajtimit te Gjaqeve*,<sup>1</sup> and they came, stayed, their message was like, "For the sake of Kosovo, we have to do everything we can to reconcile the bloods, we should unite together for change, to gain freedom, for the people to be free." And this turned out the way they thought it at that time, it was not only the blood feuds reconciliation, but reconciling bloods and bringing people together in order to help the people in Kosovo. How are Kosovo people to be helped? Concretely. Albanians from America, their message to us was, "Do everything you can to involve the American government, to ask the American government to come and help us, to come and liberate us, to help us." And their message, their fight, their honor, their pride were what cured our people, they gave us energy to stand, to fight for our country.

A big part of us here in the community worked with congressmen, with senators, with the American Government, as it is already known, with many problems, with many, but in '99 NATO comes there, starts bombing, people return in '99, in 1999 they return to their houses, they begin the new life, the new country, just as we know now 16 years later, with all the problems it has, Kosovo has become phenomenal. It's very good, it can get better, but it is well, we were fortunate, the community here was lucky for being in America, we could contribute helping with independence and the freedom of Kosovo. But this community here in America has been living and fighting for the Albanians' rights in the Balkans since 100 years ago. We have the oldest community, when the League of Nations with President Woodrow Wilson had influence to save Albania, the Albania that had remained, because if it wasn't for President Woodrow Wilson and his engagement, maybe Albania would be split into parts; as we know, Kosovo and other Albanian areas had remained under Yugoslavia, a part of Albania had remained under Greece, and only a small Albania has remained since '18 and to this day.

And, we were lucky for meeting Anton Çetta and all these people who had a big influence on us to work, to act, to come where we have come. And Anton Çetta was a very lovely man, a wise man, a nice man, a smart man and a lucky man, and he led the *Krushqit per Pajtimin e Gjaqeve*. There was Bajram Kelmendi,<sup>2</sup> Nekibe Kelmendi,<sup>3</sup> there were many others, as I said, Zekerija Cana,<sup>4</sup> professor Mark

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<sup>1</sup> *Krushqit*, escort group from the groom's family that come to fetch the bride.

<sup>2</sup> Bajram Kelmendi (1937-1999) was a lawyer and human rights activist. He filed charges against Slobodan

Krasniqi,<sup>5</sup> Azem Shkreli,<sup>6</sup> these were a phenomenal part who served our nation, our people, to heal them from the blood feuds wounds and organize them to defend the country and their nation and work for the freedom and the independence of Kosovo.

I often say that our nation was seen by the eyes of the God in the '90s, when the sacrifice of the people of Kosovo, the murder of people, the burning of the houses, a million people fled, their fight, and the community abroad, from outside Kosovo, economically helps to keep the families, and the fight of our community, the Albanians in diaspora, they helped, they fought to help Kosovo, and the sacrifice and the help of the people from abroad was what made this day possible, the independent Kosovo recognized by one hundred and something countries. There's works that needs to be done, we need to work more, there are challenges, but it is good.

**Anna Di Lellio:** *Can you tell me more about the meeting, why was your father involved in this, what did it mean to have one hundred people in your house? You had...what did they say, they gave some talk, do you remember anything? Can you give us also some memory of Bajram Kelmendi, because that's been lost a little bit.*

**Harry Bajraktari:** My father and I were active in helping our country, Kosovo, my father knew professor [Mark] Krasniqi, Anton Çetta, he know them from before, and that day my father went to the airport to welcome and support them, he was with them during all the time they spent in America, he travelled with them, I travelled with them, together with many of my friends, many of our community. We come from a family holding the title *bajraktarë*,<sup>7</sup> we gained it in the war, our ancestors were forced to go to war, to fight for Turkey, and for bravery at that time, they were *bajraktarë*, and for 200-300 years, we were kind of leaders of our place.

And my father suffered much in Kosovo, from the very heavy pressure of the Serbian Government, from the Communist Government, from the Montenegrins, and his way to immigration was full of suffering and sacrifice. He was the leader of the community, the leader of our place, and he felt it as an obligation to lead the people, to make a difference for our country. My father, our family and I, have participated, have been in America for 46 years now, and since he came to America until the day

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Milošević at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in 1998. On the first day of the NATO war in 1999, Serb police arrested him with his two children Kastriot and Kushtrim. Their bodies were found the next day.

<sup>3</sup> Nekibe Kelmendi (1944-2011), lawyer and human right activist, after the war she was a member of Parliament for the LDK and served as Minister of Justice from 2008 through 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Zekerija Cana (1934-2009), historian.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Krasniqi (1920-2015), ethnographer and writer.

<sup>6</sup> Azem Shkreli (1938-1997), linguist.

<sup>7</sup> Local military leader, literally standard-bearer, from the Turkish *bajrak*, standard. When the Ottomans began to enlist Albanian subjects for their army they chose brave representatives of the tribe to lead the recruits and they called them *bajraktar*.

he died, my father was active in everything within our community, helping our lands, helping the community, and he was part of all of these movements. I was young, but I was with them at the same time, and now I am continuing his fight, you know, it was, it was a pride for us to host *Krushqit e Pajtimit te Gjaqeve* in our house.

For 35 years, for 30 something years, our house was a diplomatic headquarter, a kind of embassy, or a diplomatic headquarter. Ibrahim Rugova, President Rugova, stayed in our house, and many many other leaders, Congressman Engel, many many others, Senator Alfonse D'Amato, Congresswoman Sue Kelly, and many many other Americans engaged in American politics. Hillary Clinton was in our house in 2006, she was our guest, so, time after time, our house turned into a place which united people to talk about the Kosovo issue, to talk about the people's issue, and our house was used, mine and my father's house was used as a kind of assembly where people gathered, Mark Krasniqi and many many others, you know, people who came time after time since the '90s until now, they always returned to our house, they stayed at our house where we invited people from the community, American friends, where we discussed how to help Kosovo.

And that was, the dinner of Blood Feuds Reconciliation was the same concept. They did it in an amazing way, for the favor they were doing to our country, to our community, it was a honor for us to gather people together to talk about helping Kosovo, helping our people, how to get liberated, how to gain independence, how to stand against Serbia and all of those. So, it was a kind of war assembly, of labor, of life, of our community, how to fight Serbia. The event of that night was an assembly where Anton Çetta held a speech, academic Mark Krasniqi, Bajram Kelmendi held a speech, Azem Shkreli held a speech, there was also Bajrush Doda there that night, he his known for Albanian music and history and he sang the songs of how our people stood against Turkey, against Serbia, against Montenegro, against communism, and it was, the intention was to unite the people, how to work more, how to move forward, and this was all the fight, this was the opinion, the thought of getting united, meeting, deciding.

There were Bajram Kelmendi and Nekibe, his wife, may peace be upon both of them and their sons, and they were really concerned of helping the country, they were very insisting on the ways the country needed to be helped, they were very insisting with the community that they needed to do more to help our country, to help our people, to help, how could we help, it was, because people in Kosovo were unemployed and when *Krushqit e Pajtimit te Gjaqeve* went to the diaspora, in Germany, America, Switzerland and all these countries, they begged the people to, "Keep your families, your relatives." And families in Kosovo were always kept by the people living abroad, because they were unemployed, they didn't have food to put on their tables, and this is the way they stood against Serbia, to live and come where we are today.

**Anna Di Lellio:** *Do you remember any blood reconciliation, any blood feud reconciliation, any story, did you go to any of them?*

**Harry Bajraktari:** I went to one of them....

**Anna Di Lellio:** In Albanian....

**Harry Bajraktari:** I went to one Blood Feud Reconciliations. It was, they asked the brother who forgave the blood, Mark Shabani, to forgive the blood of his brother who was killed in America 10 years ago, and I was there, it was very emotional, and the way Anton Çetta, Mark Krasniqi rolled the conversation, how they talked, how they asked, their demand was, "We haven't come here to forgive the blood for us. We have come here to forgive the blood of Kosovo and the people of Kosovo, we think that the time has come for you to forgive the blood to Kosovo." And they told that forgiving the bloods is our fight and honor for our country, to move forward, to be liberated from Serbia and become an independent country. Their demand has succeeded today, today we live their demand.

It was emotional, I saw Anton Çetta, his tears flowing on his cheeks when they forgave the blood, I saw the family crying, I cried at that moment as well, it was the first time for me to be in such cases, I had never been in any case of that kind before, and it was emotional, it was, I will never forget it, you know, so it was really interesting being there, interesting in the sense that the blood was being forgiven, not to the people who had come there, but the blood of Kosovo was being forgiven.

It was really, it was phenomenal, phenomenal, the sacrifice of the people who forgave the bloods, the bravery of the people, the manhood, that's, that's where we are, because people got united, they worked together, and that's why we arrived here, why we are now here, and today for example, our nation enjoys independent Kosovo. I am saying it again that it's become so good, with all the problems it has, Kosovo is phenomenal. If someone told you that it would become like this, nobody would trust, nobody would trust that Serbia would get removed from Kosovo, and that Kosovo will be liberated, but God wanted so, with the help of America and Western Countries, and we reached this point.

**Anna Di Lellio:** *I want to ask you one other thing, was your father a mediator of blood feuds before, I mean, because this stuff was going on here, so, were you aware of this?*

**Harry Bajraktari:** My father, as I told you, we come from a family which even in Kosovo always reconciled people when they had conflicts or blood feuds or misunderstandings, even when they had conflicts. I remember it, in our community, many times during 20-30 years, my father participated and organized when people found themselves in conflicts, not murders, but property conflicts, fight conflicts, money conflicts and other conflicts, but not conflicts. This was my first time to see it in the community, that he was part of Blood Feuds Reconciliation, but before yes, my father was in some cases where he brought people together. My grandfather did so as well, Musli Bajraktari, and my family has a tradition of time-after-time bringing people together and reconciling them for such cases.

In '39 I remember, my ancestor Haxhi Bajraktari was the leader, at that time it was called *islihat*<sup>8</sup> of Blood Feuds Reconciliations, he was in charge for the Peja Municipality, they went and reconciled people, so, our family time after time, was always active in bringing people together and reconciling them when they had conflicts.

**Anna Di Lellio:** *Thank you! Do you want to add something about this, it must've been a surprise for you, right? Because you...the Reconciliation of the Blood Feuds for killing...*

**Harry Bajraktari:** To me it was, to me, we saw what happened to Kosovo earlier regarding Blood Feuds Reconciliation and everything, to me it was an act, a human act, an act of when you see where Kosovo stands today, we went through many sacrifices, many people had died and been killed, people fought, for example Albanian forces, Kosovo forces fought during the '90s, NATO comes to save, our community, the diaspora engages America to help, and when you look at it, there are three-four things that together brought this day. Blood Feuds Reconciliation is one of them, it really happened at the right time, it instrumentally made the difference for our nation because it withdrew the problem people had with each-other, they removed that problem and they no longer had the fear that someone would kill them or something would happen, their only fear was that they could be killed by Serbia and how to fight Serbia and how to help and stand.

And, it's, it's, it was a human act, a goodwill act, a stand up act, an act, a nation pride act. We are proud of many things that our country has done, for example, our forces, our boys and girls who fought all their life, for one hundred years and more, or five hundred years that they fought against Turkey. We have such stories in our family, for example, our village was burned by Turks in 1878, by Serbs in 1998, they burned and shot us in 1912, '13, and time-after-time, because our nation stood for liberation, for its rights, to gain freedom... And this was a, a, a human act. It happened like this time-after-time, for example in 1890, '95, at the Assembly of Junik, Binak Alija of the village of Krasniqa was the leader of Blood Feuds Reconciliations in the same concept as Anton Çetta, at the time when people were brought together to fight against Turkey. As you know we declared our independence in 1912, but 20-30 years before that time, they reconciled blood feuds, they reconciled things in order to fight against the enemies who occupied our country, this was phenomenal, great work. And I feel lucky that my father and my mother brought me to America and for being part of this movement, or part of Kosovo liberation.

For the first time I feel like my family and I have the chance to fight Serbia or our enemies, from Washington, while my ancestors, my family never had this chance, and many many others from Kosovo, from Albanian lands. To me it is a great happiness that I had this luck, that the luck of being part of it and making the difference for our nation and for our country had been given to me, it's one of the greatest pleasures of my life. I was lucky to be part of something where I could make the difference in this aspect. Thank you!

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<sup>8</sup>*Islihat* is a form of Blood Feuds Reconciliation introduced by the Ottoman Empire.



**Anna Di Lellio:** *Thank you!*